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Title: Cold spring puts farmers in economic deep freeze

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Lead:

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HARDIN COUNTY — While the full extent of this month's freeze still is unknown, several setbacks to Hardin County agriculture are obvious.

For one thing, the toll on produce is so bad it may delay opening day of the farmers market. Also, farmers report major losses to winter wheat and alfalfa crops.

"It's not looking good," wheat grower Kerby Grey said. He doesn't know how much is lost from the 260 acres planted on his Stephensburg farm. If it's a lot, he may plant corn on the field, which already is fertilized.

Hardin County farmers, according to the USDA, raised 2,400 acres of wheat last year — nowhere near the more than 50,000 acres of corn and soybeans harvested last year.

The record cold, which followed a growth-inducing warm spell, affected mostly wheat among the local grain crops, said Chad Lee, a grain crops Extension specialist with the University of Kentucky. He said half of the state's wheat crop may have been lost to the April freeze.

The variety grown here is winter wheat, which is used in bakery products.

Besides wheat growers, livestock producers are feeling the pinch of the cold snap.

Cattle farmer Chuck Crutcher, who lives in Rineyville, described extensive damage to his alfalfa crop. His plants folded over, as they do after the fall's first killing frost.

Any regrowth will come after the damaged part of the plants are removed. Problem is, his field is too wet for grazing or mowing and rain is forecast for today.

"Right now, we're just kind of sitting on our hands," Crutcher said.

The first cutting of his alfalfa, usually the most productive, will be reduced by half.

Clover also was hit, but probably suffered less damage, Crutcher said.

To make matters worse, the area's hay supply is tight, so Crutcher may have to cut back on his herd because of lack of forage.

The cold snap also put a chill on local produce output for the season.

Shoppers at the Hardin County Farmers Market will see less fruit this year, said Brenda Thomas, the market president. The area doesn't have a large fruit crop to begin with.

As for vegetables, these may have to be replanted and therefore will show up a couple of weeks later at the Elizabethtown market, which typically opens the first week in May.

The freeze damaged Thomas' usually hardy cabbage and broccoli plants. Her raspberries and blackberries are OK, because they haven't bloomed.

Many of the area's blueberry crops suffered, though.

Also, most of Kentucky's peach and apple crops were ruined, vineyards took a beating and a Carlisle County farmer reported losing an entire pecan crop, said Bill Clary, a spokesman for the Kentucky Department of Agriculture.

It's too soon to put a firm number on losses, but the damage appears to exceed \$45 million, Clary said. "It's extremely diverse and widespread."

Kentucky Agriculture Commissioner Richie Farmer recently asked Gov. Ernie Fletcher to seek federal disaster relief.

Lawn plants also show signs of distress.

With perennial flowers, for instance, Extension agent Amy Aldenderfer recommends pruning dead leaves.

Because the ground itself didn't freeze, roots and crown were saved.

Don't prune trees or shrubs now, she said.

Aldenderfer doesn't know of any trees that were killed. Most put out secondary buds, but it will take an extra two or three weeks for them to reach full leaf this year. This normally happens by the end of May.

Aldenderfer expressed concern in March, when plants blossomed early and temperatures soared into the mid-80s. People who gave into temptation to plant warm-weather crops saw their efforts go to waste.

"If you planted tomatoes," she said, "they're toast."

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